

China Mail by American Clipper Ships

by Richard C. Frajola

This article will examine mail carried by two American clipper ships that operated between China and the United States in the period between 1846 and 1857. All such mail was carried privately and letters arriving in the United States were subject to ship letter postage due.

In the 1840s a faster sailing vessel, the clipper ship, began to be built in the United States and to a lesser extent in Great Britain. The term had previously been used to define any fast sailing vessel but soon became virtually synonymous with the unique brand of American clipper that was designed specifically for high speed sailing.

Built to carry small, valuable cargo, speed became more important than cargo capacity and the size of the hold was reduced, the bow sharpened, and the total area of sail increased. The fastest of these ships could travel more than 350 miles a day in good winds. The era of dominance of the American clipper ships in the China trade lasted from about 1845 to 1859 when several of the fastest, the so-called extreme clippers, were made in American shipyards.



Figure 1. This April 16, 1834 ship letter was sent from Canton, China, via Philadelphia, to New York City. The only reported "full rigged ship" handstamp applied to a letter from China.

Before the era of clipper ships, letters sent by ship from China to the United States often took five to six months to arrive. As a point of reference, Figure 1 shows one of the most spectacular examples of ship mail in this precursor period. Carried by the American merchant ship *Globe*, the letter dated at Canton, China on April 16, 1834 was carried around the Cape of Good Hope and after a voyage of nearly six months did not arrive in Philadelphia until October 6, 1834.

The Clipper Ship *Sea Witch*

The *Sea Witch*, one of the earliest and most famous American clippers, still holds the speed record for a trip from Hong Kong. Shown in a watercolor image in Figure 2, the

Sea Witch was 192 feet in length, had a 43-foot beam, and was of 908 tons burden. Built specifically for the China trade by the firm of Smith & Dimon of New York, her 140-foot tall mainmast carried five tiers of sails.



Figure 2. Modern watercolor illustration of the *Sea Witch* by nautical artist Petr Merkulov.

The cover shown below in Figure 3 was carried on the maiden voyage of this ship and, although not nearly as spectacular in appearance as the letter carried by the *Globe*, it is an important postal artifact that well defines the start of the America clipper ship era.

This letter from New York to Canton, dated December 16, 1846, was endorsed to be sent by the *Sea Witch*. She completed her maiden voyage from New York City, around Cape Horn, to Canton in only 92 days with this cover onboard.



Figure 3. Letter carried on the December 23, 1846 maiden voyage of the *Sea Witch* from New York to Canton, China where it arrived 92 days later.

In 1848-1849 the *Sea Witch* set the speed record for a ship under sail. The cover shown in Figure 4 was carried on the return trip from Canton to New York on this record voyage. The letter was dated at Canton on January 8, 1849 and arrived at New York City on March 25, 1849. The voyage of 14,255 miles from Whampoa, around the Cape of Good Hope to New York was accomplished in only 79 days (74 days, 14 hours from Hong Kong).



Figure 4. A letter datelined Canton, China on Jan 2, 1849 and carried by the *Sea Witch* on the last leg of her record around the world voyage to New York via Cape Hope, arriving in New York City on 25 March, 1850.

It should be noted that the trip from New York to China around Cape Horn was much slower than the return trip around the Cape of Good Hope due to wind and water currents.

The three letters discussed provide an interesting sample to contrast the duration of information transmission in the two eras. The two covers carried by the clipper ship *Sea Witch*, with an outward trip of 92 days and a return trip of 79 days equals a round trip duration of somewhat less than six months. This is equivalent to the one way trip of the letter carried on the return trip of the *Globe* in 1834.

The use of American clipper ships to carry mail declined with the introduction of steam ships operating between China and England after 1845. However, clippers were still much in evidence for mail between San Francisco and China well into the 1850s.

The *Kate Hooper*

The *Kate Hooper* was a medium clipper ship of 1,488 tons built by Hunt & Wagner at Baltimore for J.J. Hooper in 1852. The cover shown in Figure 5 was carried in 1857 when the use of clippers was changing in type of cargo carried and destinations.

The cover bears a red handstamp of Jas. Stephenson, Commission Merchants, Hong Kong and is endorsed in manuscript “per Clipper Ship Kate Hooper, Capt. Jackson” at lower left. It was carried on the *Kate Hooper* which departed Hong Kong on March 16, 1857 and arrived at San Francisco on May 5, 1857 after a trip of 43 days.



Figure 5. A cover from Hong Kong (March 16, 1857) with boxed “Jas. Stephenson / Commission Merchants/Hong Kong” handstamp carried by the clipper ship *Kate Hooper* which arrived in San Francisco on May 5, 1857.

Two advertisements that appeared in the *San Francisco Bulletin* on May 27, 1857 are shown in Figure 6. The notice at left is for the following trip of the *Kate Hooper* to Hong Kong and Macao. The July 1, 1857 issue of the same newspaper reported that the *Kate Hooper* carried \$23,517 in export goods when she departed San Francisco on May 31, 1857.

SHIPPING.

FOR HONGKONG AND MACAO.

The first class Clipper Ship

KATE HOOPER,

JOHN J. JACKSON, Esq. MASTER.

This vessel will be dispatched for the above ports immediately after the arrival of the Mail Steamer, due on the 18th instant. A large quantity of freight having been already shipped, she will sail punctually as advertised.

The reputation of the *Kate Hooper* for speed and comfort is well known: she having made the quickest passage from this port to Hongkong on record. Her last trip occupied thirty-two days from port to port, upon which occasion, she conveyed intelligence from Europe, via the United States, five days in advance of the India Overland Mail.

This ship also carries a very heavy armament for defence, a very important consideration for shippers of Treasure, during the present critical state of affairs in the Chinese waters.

For freight or passage, apply to the Captain, on board, at Lombard Dock, or to the undersigned.

SAMUEL PRICE & CO.,
Consignees, Battery street.
my23-td

AUCTION SALE.—Messrs. Jones & Bendixen will hold, tomorrow morning, a large and important cargo sale of rice, teas, coffee, sugar, &c., ex *Kate Hooper* and *Jupiter*. See advertisement.

Figure 6. Advertisements that appeared in the *San Francisco Bulletin* on May 27, 1857

The advertisement shown at right announces a sale of the cargo received from the ship which lists rice, teas and sugar. Such return trip cargoes and destinations had begun to change as discussed by Robert J. Plowman¹:

(The *Kate Hooper*) next appeared (1855) in Hong Kong and began to transport Chinese laborers to San Francisco. At that time the tea and rice trade was not nearly as profitable as the transportation of Chinese coolies. Soon, though, a slowdown in Chinese immigration to California as well as increased competition in the tea trade from the British led many large sailing ships, including the *Kate Hooper*, to change their destinations to the West Indies. Even by conservative estimates, the profit from a West Indian voyage was at least five times that which could be realized from a similar voyage to San Francisco.

In January 1856 Dr. Peter Parker, a US commissioner to China, issued a "Public Notification" calling upon all Americans on the China coast to desist from the coolie trade. James A. Hooper, the owner of the *Kate Hooper*, ignored the plea and in August 1857 entered into a charter agreement with Lydall and Still, agents for A. R. Ferran of Macao, to transport Chinese laborers to Havana, Cuba.

The trip of the *Kate Hooper* bound for Cuba that departed Macao on October 3, 1857 proved disastrous. The 600 Chinese onboard mutinied and tried several times to take possession of the ship. Some crew members deserted after arrival in Havana. The ship became known as a "coolie ship" rather than as a proud American clipper ship.

For a discussion of additional mails carried by clipper ship between the United States and China see the book *The U.S. Post Offices in China and Japan* by Frajola, Perlman and Scamp published by the Collectors Club, New York, in 2006.

1. Robert J. Plowman in "The Voyage of the 'Coolie' Ship *Kate Hooper* October 3, 1857 - March 26, 1858, Part 2" as seen on website:

<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2001/summer/coolie-ship-kate-hooper-2.html#nt8>